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Title: "Data-in-Terror: Ad-Hoc Local Epistemologies and Social Life in Crisis."

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Do criteria for evaluating truth-claims shift in a crisis? As a physician-anthropologist caring for COVID patients in the U.S., I have been participant-observing how people make decisions. Strikingly, decisions seem to be simultaneously uncertain and information-intensive. Many of us isolated at home have been tracking research studies – twitter feeds, newspaper articles, DIY YouTube videos – and synthesizing them into models of risk to help us decide whether to go outside or what kind of protective gear to wear.

This mode appears equally true in early COVID clinical medicine. "We cling to the data we can find," said one of the physicians working in a COVID unit at the hospital where I work, "and when we have no data, we make our own." Information, even sloppily obtained or unverified, seems somehow better than none at all. Two weeks into our hospital's COVID crisis,

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protocols and paradigms seemed to be changing several times a day, assembled and reassembled out of feeds, texts, conversations, emails.

One day, the hot question was whether and which hospital procedures might aerosolize COVID. We learned of a group of engineers that had given various intensities of oxygen to volunteers to measure the aerosols produced. There were low levels from high-flow, so we changed our hospital's protocols to allow its use in normal-pressure rooms, hoping to buy time to transfer crashing patients to ICUs.

Would we have used this source of information before? Unlikely. We were usually slow to change protocols, awaiting clinical trials with outcome data. But in the "imperious present moment" (Redfield 2005) of COVID, we could not wait. Interestingly, we did not move into a data-free mode; in fact, information remained the nerve impulse for the decision-making muscle. Elsewhere, I have described that decision-making at the edge of death draws less on certainty than on that which can facilitate action (Stonington 2020). Doctors in intensive settings operate like jazz musicians, building temporary explanatory narratives to move things along (Stonington 2020).

This seems broadly true of social life during COVID. To prevent an imagined dark future, we act on projections, and it is easier to build projections from low-fidelity data than from none at all. What are the consequences of a multitude of rapidly assembled ad-hoc epistemologies? Do they stabilize group behavior toward effective solutions? Or do they introduce distortions, pendulum swings, overreactions? What is their relationship to affect: do they simply drive terror? Our early COVID moment calls for an inquiry into the effects of unstable, local and improvisational epistemologies on collective social life.

#### Works Cited

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